

## **Usefulness of the World Wide Web to Primary Care Clinicians: A Pilot Study**

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The World Wide Web (WWW) has attracted great interest as a potential source of health information for health care practitioners and patients alike, but its actual usefulness has not been critically evaluated. We conducted a pilot study to examine the usefulness of the WWW as a source of answers to the clinical questions of community-based primary care clinicians, comparing it to a traditional information source, the MEDLINE database. As part of a separate study, 104 community-based primary care nurse practitioners, physicians, and physicians assistants were interviewed during one-half day of typical office practice, and their clinical questions were recorded as they arose in the course of patient care. For this pilot study, a sample of 13 of these questions was selected at random. Each question was pursued on both the WWW and MEDLINE, alternating the search order to eliminate bias. The searcher recorded the time and effort required to locate and retrieve relevant documents,

as well as qualitative observations regarding the search process. Retrieved documents were then sent to the originating clinician to assess the value of the information retrieved. In general, information from both sources was very favorably received by the clinicians, many adding comments about how the information would be used in practice. Time and effort to retrieve, select, and obtain documents were quite substantial for both sources. The greatest differences noted were in the quality and diversity of documents on the WWW, and in the greater ease and effectiveness of searching the MEDLINE database. A larger study incorporating qualitative methods is needed to further define the relative usefulness of these two health information sources.

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